

NEWS RELEASE

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Hampton at a crossroads

It's time for investment, not cuts, boards are told

City Manager Mary Bunting and School Superintendent Linda Shifflette told the City Council and School Board that Hampton has been successful in such targets as improving public safety, academic achievement and quality of life, but progress will be reversed unless investments are made.

The two boards met Wednesday morning to hear the budget outlook. It would be the fifth year of budget declines, with the city having lost more than \$14 million in real estate taxes since fiscal year 2010. Both city and schools have been through several rounds of budget cuts, with job cuts of between 10 percent and 12 percent that largely spared front-line workers, such as teachers, teacher assistants, firefighters, police officers and public works and parks crews. That's not possible for next year, the manager and superintendent agreed.

An investment would allow the city to make progress that citizens have requested in recent Community Plan and Master Plan updates. The roadmaps have been developed, but they require funds. For schools, it would allow progress on the Strategic Plan areas.

To maintain existing services, fund mandatory increases in some costs, and invest in the future of Hampton city and schools would take an increase in the property tax rate of 24 cents. Because of the decline of property values, many residents would still be paying less in taxes than they did in 2008. The year-over-year increase for a homeowner in a \$150,000 home would total \$23.60 a month – about the cost of two tickets to the movies.

Even maintaining existing services and programs will require a tax rate increase. Bunting and Shifflette estimated that increase at 16 cents, due to the decline in home value and some cost increases. If the rate isn't increased, the Bunting and Shifflette outlined a series of cuts that would be required to close the gap.

Bunting listed three dozen cuts, all of which would be required to close the more than \$7.2 million budget gap. They include: closing the Hampton History Museum, Bluebird Gap Farm, all branch libraries, Old Hampton Community Center and the Senior Center; eliminating Healthy

Start, parenting programs and school crossing guards. Grass would be mowed half as often, and contributions to most other non-profits, including Alternatives and the Downtown Child Development Center, would be eliminated. Employees, who have not seen raises since 2008, would not get raises.

Shifflette noted that cuts to close the \$8.9 million gap would have to include teaching positions. Schools would also have to: reduce elementary art and music teachers and guidance counselors, eliminate cafeteria monitors, close the Moton Early Childhood Center, increase class sizes in grades 4 & 5, eliminate the team model in middle schools, reduce high school classes from 8 to 7 by eliminating the block scheduling, replace half the registered nurses with licensed practical nurses, and outsource custodial work. Transportation would only be provided to students who live more than 1.5 miles from school (it's currently ½ mile for elementary and 1 mile for secondary school students).

See the full list of city and school cuts.

Hampton homeowners currently pay less in real estate taxes than those in surrounding localities. The owner of a median-priced home in Hampton pays \$200 less than the owner of a median-priced home in Newport News, \$270 less than in Portsmouth, \$663 less than in Virginia Beach and \$857 less than in Poquoson.

Property assessments will be down again, according to city figures. The drop in home value is smaller than last year but still above 4 percent. Details of the assessments for neighborhoods will be available Thursday, when cards are mailed to property owners whose assessment changed.

This leaves residents with a choice: Invest, protect or disinvest in their city. Come to one of the following meetings to voice your views:

Tuesday, Feb. 26, 6:30-8:30 p.m., Kecoughtan High School Saturday, March 2, 9-11 a.m., Bethel High School Thursday, March 7, 6:30-8:30 p.m., Hampton High School Saturday, March 9, 9-11 a.m., Ruppert Sargent Building, first floor conference room

City and school officials are also available to speak to citizen groups. To schedule a visit, contact 311 (727-8311).

Officials urge residents to attend one of the meetings. For those who can't, online polling will be available soon after the public meetings are complete.